

Responsive Feeding

Welcome to PD On the Go for Home Visitors. Learn five things in five minutes, supporting healthy eating at home. As a home visitor, you have the opportunity to observe, and maybe even be a part of a family's mealtimes. This video presents five key ideas to guide you in helping families make the most of these mealtime moments.

Key idea number one, respect families' beliefs and values about food. Food can be a sensitive topic. Take the time to listen to parents' thoughts, feelings, and perspectives about feeding. When you show you are listening, parents may be more open to your suggestions.

Key idea number two, encourage responsive feeding. Responsive feeding means that adults follow children's cues about eating healthy food. They will tell you how much, and which healthy foods they want to eat. Parent provides, child decides. Parents are responsible for offering healthy meals and snacks to children. Children are responsible for deciding whether they will eat, and which, and how much of the healthy foods they would like to eat. This approach is responsive, because it encourages children to listen to their body signals of hunger and fullness; develop self-control regarding how much food they will eat; build skills, such as picking up foods, or using utensils; actively participate in meal and snack times; and, effectively communicate their need for food. All of these skills help children learn to make healthy choices as they grow.

Key idea number three, avoid forcing children to finish the food on their plate. Forcing children to eat usually leads to children eating less. Controlling what, and how much a child eats, may affect a child's food preference, ability to listen to their own hunger and satiety cues, and the amount of food consumed. Using food as a reward or punishment teaches children to ignore their body's cues of hunger and fullness. Food is a basic need, and shouldn't be mixed up with discipline.

Key idea number four, establish a positive social environment at meals. There are many ways parents can make mealtimes a joyful bonding experience. Encourage families to share stories about their days, their family and friends, and their experiences together. Parents can provide ways for children to be part of food preparation. They can help wash fruits and vegetables, stir, pour, mix, and even measure. Children can help to set or clear the table. These activities build a child's confidence, self-esteem and connection to the family.

Mother: You could either sit at that table, or you could sit here.

Child: I want to sit here.

Parents can also serve as positive role models for healthy eating. Encouraging picky eaters to try new foods, or a food they don't think they will like can be frustrating. Research tells us a child may need to try a food 10 to 15 times before they will accept it. We also know, when children observe others eating foods they typically refuse, they become more willing to try those foods.

Key idea number five, meals are a time to learn new skills. Parents can nurture thinking skills by naming the shapes of different items on the table, like the plate that is a circle. They can help children count pieces of food on their plate, or count cups or napkins on the table.

Mother: Can I have one cracker please? Thank you.

Child: Can I have one cracker, please?

Parents can also nurture children's language skills by naming the colors of different foods. Introduce new vocabulary words, like delicious, juicy, or crunchy to describe the food.

Mother: Oh.

Child: I like [inaudible]

Teacher: I like broccoli, too. It's one of my favorite vegetables. Popover [inaudible] goes with broccoli?

Child: I like fava beans.

Teacher: And fava beans; Ezra loves fava beans.

Mealtimes also build social-emotional skills. Children can learn the back and forth of conversation, and the feeling of connection with family at mealtime.

And that's five ideas in five minutes. To learn more about responsive feeding, check out PD On the Go for Home Visitors to access other resources, and please visit the National Center on Health and Wellness' portal on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center for more resources to use in your work with families.

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